

England. — ¹¹²⁴ Churches, &c. — Baptists in Suffolk
THE and Norfolk Association

CIRCULAR LETTER

OF THE

ELDERS and MESSENGERS

Of the several

BAPTIST CHURCHES

MEETING

At *Watsham, Claxton, Woolverstone, Worstead, Shalfanger, and Great Yarmouth*, in the Counties of *Suffolk and Norfolk*;

Met in Association at *Woolverstone* on *Tuesday and Wednesday*, the 4th and 5th Days of *June, 1771*;

Maintaining the important Doctrines of three coessential, coequal, and coeternal Persons in one eternal and undivided GODHEAD; the free, sovereign, and everlasting Love of the eternal JEHOVAH, manifested in personal Election, ~~and~~ particular Redemption; free, full, and everlasting Salvation in, by, and through the Lord JESUS CHRIST; Original Sin, in its Guilt, Depravity, and Viciosity; free Justification by the Imputition of the immaculate Purity, perfect Obedience, vicarious Sufferings and Death of the Lord JESUS CHRIST, as our covenant Head, Surety, and Substitute; efficacious Grace in Regeneration, Conversion, and inherent Sanctification, by the almighty SPIRIT; the final Perseverance of the Saints by the Power of GOD, through Faith unto Salvation; the Resurrection of the Body, eternal Judgment, and everlasting Life, through JESUS CHRIST our Lord.

L O N D O N :

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THE
CIRCULAR LETTER

To the several Churches, by us represented, earnestly praying grace, mercy, and peace, from GOD our Father and the Lord JESUS CHRIST may be multiplied upon you, and divinely influencing^{of} you to every good word and work.

DEAR BRETHREN in CHRIST,

YOUR respective letters came safe to hand, and the important contents of them have been considered by us, and the several cases (whether of prayer or praise) have been laid before the Lord, who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think. By mutual advise and consent, we recommend the contents of the following epistle to your serious, christian, and practical regard, viz. It gives us

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a peculiar pleasure, that by your several letters we hear of Zion's prosperity ; that the sacred doctrines of the everlasting gospel in their evangelical purity are maintained by you, and the divine efficacy of the grace of those doctrines influentially experienced among you ; that the preaching thereof is the power of God unto the salvation of some, and for the edification, consolation, and confirmation of others ; that there is peace and unanimity among you, and an increasing addition unto most of you, fourteen having been added since the last association. Invaluable blessings these ! May the God of all grace, peace, and truth continue them among you, and all the churches of the living God.

Dear brethren, we judge it meet to address you suitable to your respective circumstances ; not that we claim the least superiority over you, or jurisdiction among you, to impose our determinations upon you in any thing you may judge necessary to lay before us ; but, on the contrary, desire ever strictly to adhere unto that form of church-government, which, by way of distinction, is called INDEPENDENCY, which will more plainly appear in the contents of the articles of agreement, upon which the association is founded, inserted at the end of this epistle.

epistle. As it is both the mercy and the felicity of the several churches to be in peaceable and prosperous circumstances, in some good measure, it may not be unnecessary to stir up your pure minds by way of exhortation, as follows: To walk humbly and thankfully before the God of your mercies, with all lowliness and meekness, endeavouring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, exercising a godly jealousy over your own selves, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ, i. e. from the pure, unmixed, unadulterated truths of the glorious gospel, of which Christ is the sacred sum and substance. We so much the more earnestly exhort to this, as a very awful complication of the grossest and most pernicious errors are making their advances in the professing world; may God in his infinite mercy grant, they may never be permitted to infect the churches of Christ! Arminianism, Socinianism, and Arianism, have been ranging it for a long space of time; but the dreggy errors we principally have a reference to, are such as these, viz. that a bare belief of, or assent unto, the report of the gospel, is that faith which accompanieth salvation; that re-

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morse for, and compunction under, a sense of the evil of sin, is but low enthusiasm; a denying of, and crying down, all inherent holiness; asserting, the divine law to be no rule for the life and conduct of the believer. These, and even many more extravagant, wild, and ridiculous notions, are mixing themselves with the errors of the present day. Dear brethren, we cannot but exhort you, to avoid, as much as may be, the company of all such erroneous persons, and all places where such errors are propagated, and on all proper occasions to bear testimony against them, contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints. Jude i. 3. It is evident, these evils strike at and undermine all fundamental, vital, and practical religion. Let the above specified errors but subtract their opposite truths from (blessed be God) the everlasting gospel, and there will remain nothing more than the mere name, the lifeless form, and vain pretence to Christianity. Therefore, if you have any spiritual light into, and have experienced the saving efficacy of the grace of the doctrines of the glorious gospel upon your hearts; if any regard to the sacred will and glory of the God of truth; if any love to, and zeal for, the honour and interest of the Divine Redeemer; if any just

just and becoming value for the eternal, adorable Spirit, in his quickening, sanctifying, comforting, and establishing operations ; if you have any feeling concern for the sacred gospel in its purity and dignity, for Zion in its peace and prosperity, and for poor perishing sinners' saving recovery ; *Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men : standing fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel.* 1 Corinth. xvi. 13. Phil. i.

27.

As we would exhort you to a becoming regard for the important doctrines of the gospel, so give us leave, dear brethren, to urge upon you a serious, conscientious attention unto the sacred order and ordinances of the house of God, ever remembering, that your dear Lord and Head is not only King of saints, reigning and ruling in the hearts of his people, under the sacred influences of the Spirit, and grace of the everlasting covenant, Heb. viii. 10, 12. Ezek. xxxvi. 25, 27. but also, that he is King in his holy hill of Zion, and as Man and Mediator divinely appointed thereunto, and invested therewith by JEHOVAH the Father; Ps. ii. also Ps. cx. And accordingly he hath a regal power and governing authority over his churches ; and for Zion's inhabitants to slight, neglect,

neglect, act counter unto, or intrench upon the sacred order and ordinances of the gospel, is nothing less than to slight, neglect, counteract, and intrench upon the Lord Jesus Christ, as the alone Lord, Lawgiver, and King of his church, whom we profess superlatively to love, and solemnly to adore as our great Prophet, High-priest, and King, humbly sitting at his feet, confiding in his atonement, and bowing to his gracious scepter and government. O then let us evidence our unreserved subjection unto him, by a ready, cordial, and affectionate submission unto, and practical compliance with his holy mind, his gracious will herein ; particularly conscientiously give attendance unto all church-meetings and appointed times of prayer, at least as much as may ^{be} fill up the place your Lord has appointed you unto in his house. Remember, it is both your priviledge and duty ; our Lord hath told us, *He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much ; and he that is unjust in the least, is unjust also in much,* Luke xvi. 10.

Be studious to know and willing to practise the relative duties pertaining to your spiritual connection in the church of Christ ; pay that respect to, and regard for your pastors, that your Lord hath enjoined upon you ; we ask,

WE

we desire no more. Let your temper and conduct towards them be formed and regulated by his word, and fear not doing them an injury by your kind and honourable carriage towards them.

Permit us, dear brethren, to point out some of those relative duties, due from you to them, and towards one another. As first, A due and becoming respect unto them is enjoined upon you ; *We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you in the Lord, and admonish you ; esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake, and be at peace among yourselves, 1 Thess. v. 12, 13. 1 Tim. v. 17.* Secondly, A ready cordial submiffion unto and compliance with what they lay before you, or enjoin upon you, from or according unto the word of God ; *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls, as they that must give an account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief, for that is unprofitable for you, Heb. xiii. 17. 1 Cor. xvi. 15, 16.* Thirdly, Earnest prayer, that they may be divinely fitted for, graciously assisted and abundantly blessed in the discharge of the several parts of their ministry ; *Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving, with all praying for us, that God would open unto us a*

door of utterance to speak the mystery of Christ, Col. iv. 2, 3. Ephes. vi. 18, 19. 1 Thess. v. 25. Fourthly, A ready and chearful communication of your temporal good things for their comfortable subsistence; *Let him that is taught in the word, communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things; even so bath the Lord ordained, that they which preach the gospel, should live of the gospel,* Gal. vi. 6. 1 Cor. ix. 9, 14. Fifthly, To sympathize with and stand by them in all the reproaches, afflictions, temptations, and tribulations, they may meet with for the gospel's sake; *Greet Priscilla and Aquila in Christ Jesus, who have for my life laid down their own necks,* Rom. xvi. 3, 4. Phil. ii. 25, 30. 2 Tim. i. 15, 18. Sixthly, Apply to them and make use of them in the spiritual concerns of your souls; for, *The priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts,* Mal. ii. 7. Song Sol. iii. 1—3.

We would also remind you of the mutual duties that subsists among you as fellow-members of the mystical body of Christ, the church, viz. First, Walking together in love; *Be followers of God as dear children, and walk in love as Christ also bath loved us, and given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for*

a sweet smelling savour, Ephes. v. 1, 2. Secondly, Sympathize with and manifest a tender regard for one another; *Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye that are spiritual, restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted; bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ, Gal. vi. 1, 2. Heb. xiii. 1, 3.* Thirdly, Humbly, tenderly, and affectionately watch over each other's walk and conversation for your mutual advantage, the glory of God, and the honour of the gospel; *Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men; see that none render evil for evil unto any man, but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men, 1 Thess. v. 14, 15. Heb. iii. 12. xii. 12—15. Rom. xv. 14.* Fourthly, Manifest a Christian readiness and cheerfulness to help and assist each other in times of trouble and affliction; *I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, it is more blessed to give than to receive, Acts xx. 35. Matth. xxv. 34, 40.* Fifthly, As opportunity will permit to visit one another, and enquire into each other's state; *Wherefore comfort yourselves*

selves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do, 1 Thess. v. 11. Mal. iii. 16—18. Sixthly, Stir up each other to every good word and work; Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching, Heb. x. 24, 25. chap. iii. 13. Seventhly, Pay a practical regard unto a peaceable temper and behaviour in your civil deportment in life; Recompense to no man evil for evil; if it is possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men; following peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord, Rom. xii. 17—21. Heb. xii. 14. These are some of the sacred precepts of the holy religion of the adorable Jesus, that reflect a distinguishing glory upon it, but never more so than when they appear and shine in the life and temper of the humble followers of the blessed Redeemer; therefore we have been the more particular in supporting of them by and enforcing of them from the divine oracles. May divine love constrain you, and almighty grace enable you to adorn the doctrine of God your Saviour in all things!

If

If any should seriously, captiously, or ludicrously say, Ye have pointed out the duties of others, but have not mentioned your own; we would candidly reply, Ministers, considered as believers in Christ, and fellow-members in the church of Christ, the same duties they recommend to others, are also incumbent upon themselves, and the more so as they are commanded to be examples to the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made them overseers. Or, if they are considered ministerially, then their duty as such is so evidently implied, and so strongly enforced by the various characters they sustain in the sacred word, as well as express injunctions, that it is morally impossible a truly serious, conscientious person should over-look them, or be insensible of them: are they characterized ambassadors for Christ, 2 Cor. v. 20. the importance of the trust committed unto them, and the strictness of the account to be given by them, is most evidently implied and sensibly impressed from hence: are they stewards of the mysteries of God, 1 Cor. iv. 1, 2. this dictates assiduity and fidelity to them, both towards God and men: are they spiritual fathers in Christ, 1 Cor. iv. 15. this enjoins them to be provident, affectionate, and compassionate: are they labourers together with God, 1 Cor.

iii. 9. this implies industry, constancy, and diligence : are they shepherds, Acts xx. 28. this supposeth care, arduousness, and vigilance. And indeed, as there is not one figure made use of by the Holy Ghost in the word of God (respecting the present subject) but reflects a sacred honour upon the ministry, so do they with equal energy charge the duties thereof upon the minister. Indeed, brethren, the work appears so great and important, and the account so affectingly awful, that it many times causeth us to cry out, *Who is sufficient for these things?* Brethren, pray for us, that by the supplies of divine grace, and the aids of the almighty Spirit, we may be able, faithful, and successful ministers of the New Testament, not of the letter only, but of the spirit ; for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly, 2 Cor. iii. 6. Heb. xiii. 18.

We likewise recommend a truly serious attention unto, and reflection upon the spiritual state of your own souls : viz. whether your light and knowledge be influential, your faith lively and fruitful, your hope vigorous and aspiring, your love ardent and flaming ; whether humility clothes you, a meek and quiet spirit adorns you ; whether a sense of sovereign mercy divinely animates you, the love of Christ sweetly

sweetly constrains you, and the almighty Spirit of Christ graciously enables you to walk as becomes the gospel. Or whether, on the contrary, it is a day of small things with you, and the things which remain ready to die, spiritual darkness surrounding you, unbelief prevailing against you, an indifference unto, deadness in, and unfruitfulness under divine appointments clogging you; an unconcerned negligence as to the precious fruits and effects of the exercise of the graces, the application of the promises, the discharge of the duties, and the enjoyment of the privileges, pertaining to the spiritual life of the Christian. Are these or such like evils your sad experience? if so, your case is truly affecting; you have great reason to bewail it before your God, seriously inquire into, and humbly lay to heart the causes and occasions thereof, especially the more direct, immediate, and prevalent ones. Consider the sad effects produced hereby, and the evil consequences that may awfully follow thereupon, from which nothing else but recovering grace can be your security. But we shall earnestly recommend and urge upon you, the attentive reading and considering those divine Epistles sent from heaven, by the adorable Lord and Head of the church, to the seven Asiatic churches, in the

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three first chapters of the book of the Revelations : remembering, whatsoever things were written afore time, were written for our admonition, instruction, and direction, upon whom the ends of the world are come ; be much in secret prayer, meditate upon the sacred word ; converse with humble, lively, experimental Christians ; be not easy without nearness to, and sensible communion and converse with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, under the gracious influences of the blessed Spirit, in the various duties enjoined upon you, and privileges granted to you. Let family religion be seriously and constantly attended unto by you ; let your dwellings be Bethels, God's houses where he is owned and acknowledged, worshipped and glorified ; let it be the humble resolution of your souls, that whatever others may do, you and your houses will serve the Lord. We can't but earnestly press upon you a truly religious observance of the Lord's day, both in the private family, and in the public assembly. Manifest your love to the habitation of God's house, the place where his honour dwells, by the constant attendance of you and yours : it is a sad and glaring evidence of the decay of vital religion, and the power of godliness, where this branch of the christian life is neglected. O ! where is

is that holy nearness to; that sensible communion with, gracious communication from, and growing conformity to your dear Redeemer, to your heavenly Father, the precious fruits of the humble services of his spiritual worshippers ! Where such neglects are, (we would furthermore exhort you, to lament before your covenant God and Father the awful inundation of sin and impiety, and overflow of error and heresy, the affecting decay of personal and family religion, of professors being one with and carried away by the vain and sinful customs of the world ; vital religion and the power of godliness being made the object of scorn, contempt, and the subject matter of ridicule and banter. How are the personal and mediatorial glories of the adorable Redeemer depreciated, his divine atonement rejected, the glory of his imputed righteousness eclipsed, the divine energy of the almighty Spirit in regeneration, conversion, and sanctification derided ! in fine, how is the free, sovereign, and efficacious grace of God in Christ dethroned, and the guilty, depraved, vile, and polluted sinner, man, exalted ; and, as parallel herewith, we behold real piety drooping, and immorality more and more abounding ! These are the lamentable evils of our day, which surely call aloud for the

most serious consideration, deep humiliation, and earnest supplication, among the churches and people of God, that there may be a gracious stop ^{but} to these spreading, these prevailing evils. And do not these things point out to us the reasonableness and suitableness of recommending days of humiliation and prayer to be observed by the churches? May the Father of mercies and God of all grace pour down a spirit of grace and supplication upon them, and divinely constrain them hereunto!

Once more, dear brethren, let us intreat you in the bowels of Jesus Christ, to be circumspect in your tempers, walk, and conduct; consider the wicked errors in our day, and how ready some pretenders to religion are to cast the odium of them upon the denomination you pass under. O let your conversations be as becomes the gospel of Christ in the world, in the family, and in the church; let the truth of grace, and the reality of your profession appear and shine in the civil, ^{the} moral, the social, and religious life; let the sphere you are, or may be called to act in, in life, whether as husbands or wives, parents or children, masters or servants, buyers or sellers, subjects or rulers, testify for you, that though you are not seeking righteousness, life, and salvation by the works of the law, yet you are not

not without the law to God, but under the law to Christ ; that as such you delight in the law of God in the inner man ; that it is the sacred, the divine rule by which you desire and endeavour the whole of your temper and conduct may be graciously formed and truly regulated. And may God in his infinite mercy, and by his almighty Spirit and grace grant, that each of these associating churches, together with all the churches of the living God, may, by an holy upright walk, correspondent to their professed principles, confront and, if possible, shame them who either without their knowledge, or contrary to their knowledge, basely and inviduously asperse and calumniate us as enemies unto the holy law of God. No, blessed be God, we trust we can say in simplicity and godly sincerity, not by fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we unfeignedly and cordially approve of and delight in the law of God, as that sacred and divine rule in the hands of the blessed Mediator, for the ordering and conducting both the inner and outward man. Amen.

Now, dear brethren, we commend you to Him, *who is able to keep you from falling, and present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.* To the only wise God our

Saviour be glory, and majesty, dominion, and power, both now and ever, Amen!

We rest your affectionate Brethren and Servants in the Bonds of the Gospel, the Ministers and Messengers of this Association.

[For the Information and Satisfaction of the several Churches belonging to the Association, we shall further add the Manner of our Proceedings herein.]

On Tuesday afternoon the Elders and Messengers, with others of the Brethren, being met, some time was spent in prayer by one of the Messengers; after which the letters from the several churches were opened and read, the contents of them attended unto; brother Sowden was desired to draw up the Circular Letter, and the opportunity concluded in singing and prayer. The public meeting on Wednesday was opened by singing, joined with prayer by brother Smith; after which brother Utten proceeded to preaching from the 1 Pet. i. 2. then an hymn was sung; brother Hitchcock engaged in prayer, and brother Trivett preached from Acts xvi. 5. and the opportunity concluded with singing, joined with prayer by brother Brown. The interval of the day was taken up in consulting and advising upon matters

ters of difficulty, also in giving our thoughts upon the following passages of scriptures, Isaiah xlii. 3. Rom. vi. 12. John xvii. 19. The public worship in the evening was entered upon by singing, joined with prayer by brother Esdall; after which brother March proceeded to preaching from John xvi. 13. and the Association concluded in singing the tenth hymn of the first book of Dr. Watts, joined with prayer by brother Sowden.

The next Association to be at *Worstead*, on the first Tuesday and Wednesday in June, 1772. Messrs. Hitchcock and Sowden to preach, in case of failure Mr. Jabez Brown; the Ministers and Messengers to be at Mr. Culley's by two o'clock on Tuesday.

The ARTICLES of AGREEMENT on which this Association is founded.

THE following Articles are what the aforesaid Churches do unanimously agree to be the ground and basis of their Association, with a view to the glory of God, the honour of Christ, and the welfare of the churches.

I. The general end designed herein, is the cultivating and establishing mutual acquaintance, with aid and assistance, unto love and concord, amongst the Baptist Churches.

II. That

II. That when God in his providence shall remove any of the pastors belonging to these associating churches, either by death, or otherwise lay them aside, they do mutually agree, to supply that vacant church until they have a supply.

III. That if it should be the unhappiness of any of these associating churches to have any difference, discord, or divisions amongst them, these sister-churches shall jointly endeavour to establish peace and reconciliation amongst them by prayer, counsel, and advice.

IV. That these associating churches do utterly disclaim all manner of superiority or superintendency whatsoever over one another, and that we have no authority or power to prescribe or impose any thing upon the faith and practice of any of the churches of Christ in this association.

V. That the associating churches agree, that in those things wherein one church may differ from another in what is not essential to salvation, or strict communion, shall not impose upon particular churches any sentiments peculiar to themselves, but leave every church to their own liberty, to walk together as they have received from the Lord.

VI. That if any particular offence should arise betwixt one church and another, or betwixt one brother and another, the offence, or offences, shall not be admitted to be debated among us, until the rules Christ hath given in that matter, be first answered, and the consent of each party had, or sufficiently endeavoured for.

VII. That whatever is determined by us in any case, shall not be binding to any one church, until the consent of that church be first had, and they conclude the same among themselves.

VIII. That all things we offer by way of counsel and advice, be supported by the word of God, and the Scriptures annexed thereto.

IX. That when any of the associating churches shall need a supply, according to the above specified articles, the said vacant church shall first apply to that church which is nearest to it, and so proceed through the whole.

X. That we will by all becoming means discountenance a litigious spirit as the bane of that peace, concord, and amity, which is both the honour and felicity of all Christian societies.

XI. That these articles of this Association be transcribed into the church-book of each respective church, and be signed by their pastors and deacons, and two or more of their members in the name of the whole church.

XII. That the Messengers that come to these meetings, be recommended by a letter from the church, and none be admitted to speak in this assembly, unless by general consent; and every association to be upon the first Tuesday and Wednesday in June annually.

XIII. That there shall be annually chosen a Moderator to preside over, and regulate such debates as may occasionally occur.

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HOW beauteous are their Feet,
Who stand on Zion's Hill,
Who bring Salvation on their Tongues,
And Words of Peace reveal.

How charming is their Voice,
How sweet the Tidings are!
Zion, behold thy Saviour King,
He reigns and triumphs here.

How happy are our Ear,
That hear this joyful Sound;
Which Kings and Prophets waited for,
And sought, but never found.

How blessed are our Eyes
That see this heavenly Light,
Prophets and Kings desir'd it long,
But dy'd without the Sight.

The Watchmen join their Voices,
And tuneful Notes employ;
Jerusalem breaks forth in Songs,
And Desarts learn the Joy.

The LORD makes bare his Arm
Through all the Earth abroad;
Let every Nation now behold
Their SAVIOUR and their GOD.

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